



RESEARCH

Using archives, local history
and special collections

This guide has been created by Scotland's Urban Past (SUP), a five-year community-engagement project from Historic Environment Scotland.

We support communities to record, research and celebrate the history on their doorsteps.

Through our free training and resources, people of all ages can discover and share the fascinating stories of Scotland's towns and cities.

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Using archives

When preparing for your first visit to an archive or library local-history or special collections department, please bear in mind the following points. Most archives operate in a similar way but there may be exceptions and additions to the guidance provided here.

In advance of your visit

Organising your visit

- contact the archive or library to let them know you plan to visit. Many ask that you make an appointment
- consult our [Research Resources](#) as well the archive's or library's own online catalogues to explore and understand what material they hold. Use **keyword searches** to pinpoint specific records you want to view when you visit. Save time by giving staff details of material you wish to consult in advance so that it is ready for you on arrival
- find out whether the records you wish to view will be available. Many archives and libraries store some of their collections off-site (the British Library in central London, for instance, has stores in Lincolnshire). Some items may require conservation treatment or may need to be digitised before you can view them. Some more recent items may be subject to data protection or copyright restrictions
- find out exactly where the archive or library is located. This is useful to plan not only your journey but also your catering arrangements. Angus Archive, for example, is located in a rural library more than two miles from the nearest shops or café

What to bring

- find out which identification documents you must provide to register as a reader. Do you need to take passport-sized photographs? Reader registration forms provide the archive/library with details of your name, address and research interests

- check if the archive or library permits the use of laptops in their search room. Do they have designated workstations which need to be booked in advance?
- find out what you are permitted to bring into the search room and where you can store your bag and coat. Many archives permit only pencils, paper, laptops and personal research notes. Lockers (often with coin deposit) are usually provided for storing your other belongings. A clear plastic bag may be provided to take items into the search room. Mobile phones (switched to silent) and personal music players are not always permitted
- bring cash for copying services if these are provided. Many archives and libraries now also allow self-service photography for personal research purposes. To take your own photographs, you will need to fill in a form giving details of what you photograph, and you may be charged a fee
- take plenty of information about your site, building or subject, including locations, dates, names of people and copies of any notes you have made already to ensure a productive visit. You may be asked to leave books, journals or original documents outside the search room

Your research

- ensure you factor in sufficient time for your research visit(s), bearing in mind that you may be permitted to view only one item at a time, and that not all items viewed will help you towards your research goal
- ensure you factor in sufficient time for deciphering historical handwriting, which can be especially time-consuming
- establish what your research goal for the visit is. Remember, discovering that material is not useful is also helpful

During your visit

Items in archives, museums and many libraries' local history and special collections are unique and irreplaceable, and so need to be handled with great care. Each institution will have specific guidelines for using materials in their search room or reading room. Listed below are some basics of good practice to bear in mind when you visit.

sufficient.

On every visit you will need to fill in an order slip for each item you request from the catalogue. In advance of your visit, an email giving item details is usually sufficient.

When organising your visit, remember that the staff need time to retrieve items and that retrieval is often carried out at allotted times only.

Archival etiquette

- wash and dry your hands thoroughly – while most archival items can be handled with clean hands, photographic material must be handled with gloves (usually purple nitrile latex-free and powder-free gloves)
- do not take food or drinks into the search room or reading room – this includes water, chewing gum, cough sweets and other confectionery
- handle all items as carefully as possible and notify staff if you notice any damage – if an item is very fragile and/or consulted regularly, you may be invited to view a digital image or a copy
- open only one file, box or bundle of papers at a time to avoid mixing papers between files – some archives will issue only one item at a time for this reason
- protect the item you are viewing by using the book supports and weights when asked to do so
- do not try to force a bound item to lie flat and do not leave an item lying open or facing down
- do not remove drawings, maps or photographs from transparent polyester pockets
- use only strips of acid-free paper provided by staff as bookmarks
- ensure that you return any files with loose pages, photographs, drawings or maps in the correct, original order
- take notes using pencil and paper or a laptop/tablet only
- do not mark items in any way
- do not lean on items
- ensure you let staff know if you wish to consult material in the following days; otherwise items will be returned to store

Compiled using guidelines from the Historic Environment Scotland library at John Sinclair House, University of Glasgow Archive Services, Angus Archives and Edinburgh City Archives.


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